

How valuable are e-textbooks to the student experience? An analysis of e-textbook provision at the University of Sussex

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How valuable are e-textbooks to the student experience? An analysis of e-textbook provision at the University of Sussex

The Library embarked on an ambitious project to roll out e-textbooks to the University of Sussex Business School. Smaller scale pilots in previous years demonstrated the potential for e-textbooks to enhance the student experience by providing access to essential reading for every student. Feedback from both staff and students had made us aware of the increasing problem within the School with providing essential reading. Textbooks are generally very expensive which means students are often reluctant to purchase them. Increasing student numbers within the Business School has put more pressure on limited Library print copies. Furthermore, the publisher model has been to target textbook sales directly to students rather than providing a standard ebook for library acquisition (Chad 5).

E-textbook provision is a relatively new model of acquisition and delivery for university libraries. It has been implemented very successfully at a number of universities, who have used it for promotional and recruitment purposes, notably Coventry University's "No Hidden Costs" campaign (Forster 125) and the University of Manchester's "Books Right Here Right Now" strategy (Broadhurst 629). A key driver behind the provision of e-textbooks at the University of Sussex is the student experience, not just in terms of removing hidden costs and improving access, but also expanding on student digital capabilities through the enhanced technologies of e-textbooks and the opportunities for digital learning. This thinking is supported by student feedback in a recent survey:

"E-textbooks are so much easier to use than regular textbooks and it's great that you don't have to spend a lot of money that you would buying a regular textbook. I find the e-textbooks much less intimidating than regular textbooks, as some are so long and thick, whereas e-textbooks not difficult to use and finding the exact subject or section in the book is very easy."

For the last few years, the Library has supplied e-textbooks to students at the University of Sussex Business School. This year, e-textbooks were provided for 17 first year Autumn term modules where there were over 200 students and where the tutor had indicated that there was a 'core' textbook.

Our e-textbook suppliers provide extensive analytics, enabling us to monitor usage closely. The analytics reveal quite a mixed picture with uptake varying from 17% to 100%. By this we mean the percentage of students on any one module who have 'redeemed' their e-textbook. The mean average across the 17 modules is 65% uptake. With increased pressure on library budgets, we need to be certain that e-textbooks represent good value for money but what does that look like? Can we put a percentage on it? And can we find out why 35% of first year students are *not* using their e-textbooks?

We sent a survey to the Business School to obtain some qualitative feedback. Of the students who responded, 97.6% had used one of the e-textbooks. The self-selecting nature of the survey meant that those who had not engaged with the e-textbooks were much less likely to engage with a survey asking them questions about the e-textbooks. The 2.4% of respondents who had *not* used an e-textbook said they had either purchased their own book or used a library copy instead. Though not captured by the survey results, it is likely that this percentage is much higher, given the low take up of the e-textbook

for some modules. However, it is also possible that as first year students, they are just aiming for the pass mark for their module and feel they can get by with only using the lecture notes (avoiding the use of a textbook altogether). This has certainly been identified as one of a number of attitudes in a previous survey.

An additional observation from the Kortext Analytics Trends dashboard is a noticeable reduction in engagement with the e-textbooks midway through the term. The ability for a lecturer to see this level of granular detail around student engagement with the text provides a unique opportunity to respond to this at an early stage.

There is more investigation to be done around this low take up in some modules. We will be finding out from tutors how closely the teaching in their modules mapped to the e-textbooks. It seems highly likely that in modules where the content of the e-textbook was embedded into the teaching, high student engagement with the e-textbook was recorded. Conversely, it seems probable that in modules where there was low take-up, the e-textbook had been requested by the tutor as the key text for that module but it had not been closely integrated into the teaching. This would suggest that there is more work to be done on tutors' interpretations of 'core reading' or 'key textbooks'. For example, in the module which had the lowest take-up, a particular Macroeconomics textbook had been requested but a glance at the reading list revealed that the tutor had listed weekly readings from an alternative textbook which was available online as a standard ebook.

For the students who did take advantage of the e-textbooks, how did they use them and what did they like about them? The survey indicated that the majority of students find e-textbooks easy to use. It is concerning that 17% of students in our survey said that they found the e-textbooks difficult to use. At the start of the year, instruction was provided by library staff during introductory lectures. Most students felt that they had received enough instruction but 10% felt that they had not. This does not map very neatly to the 17% of students who reported finding the e-textbook difficult to use. It is possible that some of those students had missed the introductory lecture but we may need to give further consideration to the support that we offer at the start of term, to maximise student engagement.

Students were given space in the survey to tell us what they thought of e-textbooks. The advantages that they listed included the ease of keyword searching: "They are a very useful and easy to use source for studying a subject - e.g. searching through them is much quicker than searching through their paper versions" and "The ability to look up keywords can help in gaining a fuller understanding to those words you do not fully understand".

Students also appreciated the financial saving: "It's amazing that I didn't have to spend money on buying the actual hard copy, and it's easy to use. I love that you can get it offline as well."

Portability was listed as an advantage: "They are accessible and portable meaning you can read on the go and not have to carry a large textbook with you" and "I think they are a good idea as it helps to easily carry around your textbook on different devices." Functionality was also mentioned: "At first I thought that I would prefer a real book but the quality of the features and the accessibility was really

useful for me.” Students picked out the highlighting tool as being particularly helpful, enabling them to “pick key points that are crucial for examinations.” Students also listed the time-saving aspect: “I think it is very useful, it saves me time, I don't have to renew and borrow books over and over and it's really easy to use.”

In the survey, 50% of respondents indicated that the *note taking* feature was either very useful or quite useful. Interestingly, this preference was not replicated in the analytics platform, with very little use being made of the notes functionality after the start of the module. This is an area for us to follow up through further user engagement.

Highlighting text within the e-textbook and keyword searching were the most used features, supporting the survey responses on how useful these features were. 70% of students found keyword searching either very useful or quite useful and 50% of respondents found the highlighting feature either very useful or quite useful. The platform analytics trends mirrored the survey response for the use of copying text and printing from the e-textbook with an average of 10 pages per user either copied or printed.

Overall, 71% of respondents answered ‘Yes’ to the question, ‘Did the e-textbook have the functionality that you need?’, 22% said that they were not sure and 7% provided free text comments. Comments included: “Would be nice if it had a full screen mode [it does] and a better phone app” and “Hovering over keywords to get a definition would be a useful addition to the features already available”.

However, not all students found the e-textbooks easy to use and some stated that they would prefer a print copy if given the choice. Interestingly, there is quite a continuum of opinion ranging from “hated it”, “it's the best substitute for not having physical books”, to “much prefer to have this option”. Initial analysis of the use of the print copy of e-textbook titles did not show a strong correlation between the low take-up of an e-textbook and use of the Library's print copy. In some cases the Library had already purchased single user licences for the standard ebook of the same or earlier edition of the e-textbook and this is likely to have been another factor limiting the take-up of the e-textbooks.

There were some comments about the ease of use of the platform app such as “it seemed quite complicated to use at first and took some learning to understand it” and “the platform can be clunky at times”. However, there were far more comments emphasising the benefits such as “the e-textbooks are a much better idea in the way that you can make notes directly on your laptop with the textbook upon your screen, making it much easier to make notes quicker and faster. Additionally, it is easily accessible to all those with access to Canvas (the Sussex VLE) which is useful. Also, the ability to look up keywords can help in gaining a fuller understanding to those words you do not fully understand.”

The e-textbook platform, Kortext, includes a Lecturer Dashboard that provides interesting insights into student use of the e-textbooks, including a Search Term word cloud, percentage of the book used and the actual pages viewed. Assessing the value of the e-textbook model is as much about the lecturer engagement as the student engagement. A successful outcome is only achieved when the e-textbook

is truly integrated into the teaching. The technology is there to enable this but the evidence indicates that the platform features are not always fully utilised.

Going forward, we need to ascertain whether e-textbooks represent good value for money and understand the best metrics to demonstrate their value. For the majority of the engaged students, the provision of e-textbooks have been warmly welcomed but is it a good use of limited Library budgets if a significant proportion of the class does not feel the need to use it? We need to work more closely with the Business School to ensure that all tutors understand the selection criteria to avoid the scenario whereby e-textbooks are requested but are not then fully embedded into the teaching. We will need to decide what we think acceptable use looks like in terms of the percentage take-up by students, and then be prepared to decline requests from tutors where it has fallen below this level. The big lesson that we have learnt is that tutors play a crucially important role in the successful implementation of e-textbooks. A thorough introduction provided by library staff is not enough if the tutors do not teach closely with the text.

On the whole, students like the idea of having e-textbooks purchased for them and find them engaging, easy to use, flexible and time-saving. However, we need to investigate further the non-use of e-textbooks, to enable us to be certain that e-textbooks are valuable to the student experience as a whole.

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